

MOTHERWORK LEARNING: AN ART-INFORMED INQUIRY INTO MOTHERING AS A SITE OF ADULT LEARNING

Rose Barg

Abstract

This paper explores the learning and knowledge creation that takes place within the lived experience of motherwork. Women who provide primary care to children tell stories about significant moments of change and learning that result from motherwork. Using art-informed inquiry that includes storytelling and poetic narrative, I examine motherwork as a site of adult learning. An important part of adult education links learning to change and transformation for individuals as well as for society. Personal transformation often begins with a disorienting dilemma, which subsequently evolves. In order to effect change in society, many adult educators recognize that the goals of transformation are embodied in the day-to-day lives of people who challenge existing oppressive societal systems. Therefore, this study explores the links between personal agency in lived experience and public effectiveness.

Résumé

Cet article s'attarde à l'apprentissage et à la construction du savoir à travers l'expérience d'être mère. Des femmes qui prodiguent des soins de base aux enfants racontent des moments forts de transformation et d'acquisition de connaissance attribuables à leur rôle de mères. Au moyen d'une enquête par analyse littéraire, incluant des récits et du discours poétique, j'examine le rôle de mère comme lieu d'apprentissage.

Collectively, women identify the ongoing nurture and maintenance of relationships with their children as key to their learning. The focus of their work centres on ethical principles and practices that include reciprocity, democracy and mutual respect. Further, some of the women report that the life-affirming work of caring for, and advocating on behalf of children who faced life's struggles, nudged them to develop increased self-trust, learn to take action and fight for justice.

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Women do a disproportionate amount of motherwork throughout the world (Miles, 1996; Waring, 1988). At the same time, patriarchal society has subordinated women, institutionalized motherhood and mandated that only mothers should do this work. Yet women's lived experience of mothering often contradicts the mainstream notion of what this work "is" or "should be" (Rich, 1986). These contradictions continue to subordinate women and are recognized in the increasing discourse regarding the work of mothering among the social sciences (Davies, Collings & Krane, 2003; Eichler, 1997; Thorne, 1992).

However, motherwork as a site of learning, where subsistence-oriented work takes place, remains largely overlooked by theories of adult learning (Hart, 1992, 1995). Further, the significant contribution that motherwork makes to families, as well as society as a whole, remains undervalued and invisible (Davies, Collings & Krane, 2003).

Adult Learning as Change

Adult educators link learning to change and transformation for individuals as well as for society. At the personal level, change involves a cyclical process that includes experience, reflection, conceptualization and action (Kolb, 1984). Personal transformation often begins with a disorienting dilemma, which subsequently evolves. This process includes critical reflection, self-examination, and a reorientation that results in action (Mezirow, 1991).

In addition, feminist educators and theorists are taking a new look at the everyday lived experience of women as a site of learning and knowledge creation. Tisdell (1995) and Maher (1987) indicate that theories of feminist pedagogy fall largely into two categories. The gender model, which has benefited from work such as Belenky et al. (1986) deals with women's socialization as nurturers. The liberatory model analyzes and challenges society's systems of oppression and builds on the work of Freire and Habermas. This includes work such as Miles (1996) and Luttrell (1997). Both theories have validity, says Tisdell (1995), but if we examine the experience and learning of individuals, without analyzing the social systems of oppression that have contributed to people's experience, then we are not contributing to any substantive change in society.

In order to effect change in society, adult educators also recognize that goals of transformation are embodied in the day-to-day lives of people who challenge the existing oppressive structures of society (Youngman, 1996). Therefore, if adult educators and feminisms seek to transform society, a synthesis or integration of these two models is necessary, as currently the

gender models ignore issues of power, while the liberation models tend to ignore the personal domain. Therefore, says Maher (1987), "a pedagogy for both personal agency and public effectiveness needs both strands of thought" (p. 98). This means that the day-to-day subjective experience of learning and transformation of women must still be heard: a concept that is echoed by Davies, Collings and Krane (2003), in their effort to make mothers more visible. However, the study of this experience must be analyzed to include an examination of the societal structures, forces and powers that have contributed to subordination based on gender, race and class. Further, studies that promote societal transformation must recognize and make visible the substantive value of this work that women do, too often silently, but which benefits individuals, families and society (Hart, 1992, Davies, Collings & Krane, 2003).

Research Design

This paper explores self-identified moments of learning that take place within lived experience, using art-informed inquiry methods that begin with women's story-telling. The focus is on significant moments of change in women's lives that centre on their work as mothers. Research questions include: What are the epistemological foundations of the lived experience and learning within motherwork? What knowledge creation takes place within this work? In what ways can the knowledge creation that takes place within this work contribute to hope for the future?

Through self-inquiry and the stories of women's experiences of change, I explore turning point moments that take place in the intensive work of providing primary care to children. In exploring the processes and the products of learning, women's experiences are examined in the context of their positions within society, taking into consideration interlocking issues of gender, race and class.

Currently, art informed methods of research, including creative writing and poetry are becoming a recognized part of ethnographic data analysis. In addition, feminist poets have made a convincing link between poetry and its relationship to women's lived experience, oppression and subordination (Lorde, 1984). Because of its simplified, impactful and truth-telling nature, poetry has the capacity to convey meaning to readers that is intuitive, powerful and prophetic (Denzin, 1997). In order to present the research findings in ways that honour the wholeness of the stories, capture their intensity, and appeal to the emotions of readers, I represent findings in an art-informed way that include a method of representation that I call "poetic

narrative." This method builds on what Glesne's (1999) identified as poetic transcription. To do this, the words and phrases from the original transcripts are woven into poetic pieces in an effort to maintain storytellers' voice, while representing the work as creative writing. In order to create a better flow, sometimes the chronology or the verb tenses are changed. Sometimes words from the interview questions are added to the story, for the purpose of continuity. However, at essence, poetic narratives are the storyteller's own words captured in poetic form.

Self-inquiry

To begin this research, I conducted an extensive self-inquiry into my own experience as a mother. In keeping with feminist research practices, this experience assisted me to gain a greater level of self-knowledge, to empathize with the experience of research participants, and to work towards reducing the hierarchical relationship between the participants and myself (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). I shared both my experiences and the poetic representations of my self-inquiry with research participants. Here is one of the poetic narratives that resulted from this self-inquiry. It describes a situation I encountered when my daughter was in grade five. Because I was concerned for her safety and the safety of other children, I learned to confront the school system and authority figures.

My Homework

Mr. G.

would touch her a lot

...touch her face

...hold her chin.

'Sounded like

this was directed

specifically

at girls.

I called the principal

who said

"There, there, dear

I appreciate your concern

but...."

*I called the superintendent...
I called the Ministry...
Someone was sent
to observe
this fellow's teaching:*

*(everything was different
that day,
of course).*

*I wanted to be very clear...
this wasn't just about
my daughter:*

*it was about
changing what this guy
was doing.*

*I had been thinking
teachers and schools
were there to benefit
children.*

*There was this
moment
of conflict:*

*A good mother
protects her children
from harm....*

*A good woman
does not challenge
social structures...*

does she? (Barg, 2001, p. 117-118)

Art-informed Representation

Following the self-inquiry, I met with research participants to hear their stories. Here are excerpts from three of the women's stories, written as poetic

narratives, where they describe moments of learning and transformation that resulted from their work as mothers.

Kate's Story

Kate is a white, 40-year-old mother with two children. Kate came out as a lesbian four years ago, and left her marriage where she had been the primary caregiver to her children for many years. In keeping with the findings of Kranz and Daniluk (2002), who have studied the experience of lesbian mothering in North America, Kate lost the day-to-day custody of her children to their father. Consequently, Kate had to redefine what motherwork meant for her. This piece is written with a right-hand margin to provide a visual image of the "pushing against the norms of society" that Kate faced, as she came out as a lesbian and struggled to maintain day-to-day contact with her children. Ultimately, Kate was determined to be a role model for her children, in terms of her life choices and authenticity. Therefore, she learned to redefine motherwork within her new context.

Reclaiming Motherwork

*What I have discovered
in almost four years
of being a mother
who's not there,*

*is that mothering
in this culture
is all wrapped up with
being there...*

*with routine
and custodial
every day stuff.*

*I've had to redefine
what mothering is for me.
And to reclaim the fact that
I'm still an advisor,
a sort of guide person.*

I am the person who cares,

*who listens
who backs them up
and is willing to share,
...reminding them
where their boundaries are.*

*They can fall back on me
in their crises
and know that I'll give them heck,
but I'll be the first
to pat them on their backs
for doing well...*

*If other women are facing
this struggle
I would say,
"Keep going.
Sort it out moment by
moment."*

*But be true to yourself
and in the end
you will have the
reassurance that:*

*"This is really what I am,
this is who I am
and I feel it to the core."*

Joanne's Story

Joanne, a 46-year-old woman of Chinese heritage, came to Canada with her husband and family, looking for a better life for their children. Her husband was unable to find work in his own field. When she realized that the "dream life" they had planned for themselves in Canada was evaporating and that her daughter needed more attention in order to thrive at school, Joanne decided that she would make some substantive changes. Thus, Joanne is now a "virtual single mother" (Sheppard, 1998) who struggles with the daily realities of mothering children through a school system that is constructed in a language and culture foreign to her. However, in keeping with the notion developed by Noddings (1984) regarding ways in which women approach

caregiving, Joanne reorganized her life to meet the needs of her daughter, and now finds pleasure in knowing that her daughter is thriving.

Mothering Perils: Work and Sleep

*Two year after we arrived here,
we started our own
restaurant business.*

*I had to devote a lot of time to it.
It left no time for the kids.*

*And then,
whenever we had time,
we had to entertain ourselves;
otherwise life seemed so dull.*

*We were in a new country.
I had my new job.
We owned a restaurant;
there was a recession.
Then the price of houses went down!
We lost a lot of money!*

*(In Hong Kong, my husband
had a good government job.
He lost a lot of income
...and self esteem.)*

We fought and argued.

*Gina watched all these happenings
she was neglected,
because we were too busy coping!*

*The teachers complained:
She's not sociable
not attentive in class...
not participating very much.*

*I kept hoping my daughter would get better
I knew I should stay with her
...talk with her more
...read books.*

*I didn't have time!
Every time I came home,
I was so exhausted,
I'd go to sleep.*

*Work and sleep...
Work and sleep...
Work and sleep....*

*I asked: What are we doing?
I'm working hard...
my husband's working hard....*

Our dream didn't come true.

*Since I was doing well...
(I had cemented my own job here)
and my husband was not doing well,
I thought,
maybe he'd get a better job at home.*

*So, after we closed the business,
my husband stayed in Hong Kong.
I think it is better this way.*

*Since then
he had gained his faith back,
and he is satisfied with what he's doing.*

*But my daughter
was still having problems
at school.*

*So now I try to stay working with her.
I listen to what her problems are.*

*I talk to her
I try to stay with her all the time.*

And I see a big improvement!

Rita's Story

Rita is a 43-year-old immigrant mother with seven children. After 25 years in an abusive marriage, her husband left and returned to Trinidad. It was at that point that Rita and two of her teenage sons experienced the painful realities of the Canadian legal system. This piece is centred on the page to provide a visual image of the way Rita described her learning, as she tried to centre herself, learned to be a single mother, and more recently to fight for justice.

Courtroom Heartbreak

*Now, isn't life funny?
My older boy got jailed
the first time
for something he didn't do.
The second time when he really was there,
he got off.*

*Now, my younger son got off
the first time, when he was there,
and the second time
when he knows nothing of what happened,
they jailed him.*

*It's the justice system.
It's so messed up.
I'm wondering if it needs
a strict overhaul...*

*The only part I wanted to do something about...
was that judge, judging me....
That really took me.*

*It was when he said:
"Oh, she's a single mother with seven children.
that's the problem with these single moms.*

*They have to work and
they can't look after their kids
and then their kids knock about..."*

*These men, judging women...
they don't know anything about
what it's like to be a single mom.*

*Well, it's made me realize
the world is not
such a nice place, after all.
This is serious stuff.*

*It just keeps on niggling away
at the back of my mind...
that man sitting there on his high throne,
like he's God.*

*It's hard to fight them, because
they get all the perks...
they know all the ropes.*

*No, life is not very nice
and it's less nice for women,
less nice still for single mothers,
...even less nice for vulnerable children,
and children of colour....*

*You're just at the bottom
of the heap.*

*If I met another woman
in a similar situation,
I would tell her everything!
I don't want to see this happen
to innocent people.*

*I'd say
"Take notes
Try to call for a mistrial..."*

*Go for Freedom of Information:
try to get records of
what was said."*

And I'd say,

*"Fight for him,
fight tooth and nail
fight the system, tooth and nail....
Do everything you can!
Don't sit back and take it!
Because they'll walk all over you."*

Contributions of Motherwork Learning

The women's stories of contestation, transformation and learning make visible the fact that motherwork and motherwork learning contribute to society in multi-layered ways, that include the homeplace, as well as within the greater society. In support of Hart's (1992, 1995) notion, research findings indicate that the women who do this work develop knowledge that is grounded first and foremost in life-preserving, life-affirming practices, and in support of the ever-changing situations in which they find themselves and their children.

The Daily Work of Mothering

As noted earlier, many links have been made within the social sciences, between motherwork and the well-being of children. However, the societal notion that motherwork is the primary responsibility of mothers contributes to creating a double burden of work for many women, as they struggle to provide primary care for children and to support their families financially. Further, it limits their choices, both in their careers and in their mothering (Kitchen, 1997). This is because the current societal model of parenting places all the responsibility for this work on individual families (often single women) (Eichler, 1997) where it is determined to be "natural," and of no economic value (Waring, 1988).

Instead of blaming women for the problems their children encounter and for the problems of society, as is often experienced (Davies, Collings & Crane, 2003; Kaplan, 1992), further analyses are needed that study the long-term decreased costs in health care and societal evils, as well as the overwhelming benefits to society, when motherwork is done well. As Eichler

(1997) suggests, such analyses could contribute to the development of public policies that support the notion that parenting work is a social responsibility that benefits all of society. Chancer (1998) supports such a view as she develops a more contemporary model on the much-debated concept of "guaranteed annual income". This concept is grounded in a feminine principle, in that it provides a framework that supports all people, just because they are there and deserve to be respected, and not because of what they contribute through paid employment.

Beyond the Self

As was demonstrated by the participants in this study, women often contribute to the social well-being of children other than their own, by taking action to advocate on behalf of their own and other children, and to fight for social justice. This contradicts the notion that the work of providing care for their children takes place in the private sphere. When women advocate on behalf of their children by confronting those in positions of power, these actions contribute to effectiveness that goes well beyond the self or the private sphere, and into the public domain.

Beyond that, women have a history of providing care for children other than their own, in their roles as sisters, aunts, babysitters, friends and grandmothers (Noddings, 1984). All of these contribute to the well-being of society but continue to be invisible and unrecognized as having social and economic value.

Implications for Society

Motherwork, at its best, is subsistence-oriented work that contributes to the well-being of individuals, families and society, because it is grounded in life-centred, life-affirming principles. In keeping with the perspectives developed by Miles (1996) and Hart (1992), if the principles and practices of this work were generalized to the greater society, this could contribute to the sustenance of the earth and to more life-affirming practices for all.

Currently many social economists, workplace management theorists, environmentalists and adult educators agree that if there is to be hope for the future, then some kind of societal transformation must also take place. While there are individuals within all these disciplines that promote life-centred change, all of them have historically overlooked motherwork as a site where life-affirming learning and work that contributes enormously to society's well-being takes place.

In the midst of the current societal climate that focuses increasingly on the market economy at the expense of individuals and those marginalized,

this study looks at the place of adult educators among those who have overlooked motherwork as site of learning and knowledge creation. It is time for adult educators to take a renewed look at the work that women do within the homeplace, particularly motherwork, and advocate for public policies that legitimize the value of this work and recognize how this work contributes, although currently too invisibly, to the lives of individuals, families and all of society.

Reciprocal Learning through Motherwork

To conclude this paper, I share one last poem. I call this a 'collective poetic narrative', because this piece represents actual transcribed responses from the conversations with all the research participants. I asked each of the participants what they had learned from their children. The women's responses support the notions of Noddings (1984) and Ruddick (1989), who indicate that part of the reciprocity in the care giving relationship is manifest in the way that caregivers also receive care and learn from those cared-for.

Children: Our Greatest Teachers

*Collectively,
we watched
our children grow,
and through
attentiveness and care
we learned...*

*We learned to
stop worrying,
to love living...
to be filled with
optimism and hope....*

*We learned
to live and let live...
to let nature
take its course,
having found that children*

*are not owned and
cannot be controlled.*

*We learned
a depth of loving...
and emotion...*

*...of a love freely given,
unselfish,
without judgment,
filled with forgiving;
bearing no
conditions.*

*And through our mothering,
we grew
in the knowledge
that instead of merely
teaching our children,
as we had once imagined,
the children had become*

our greatest teachers.

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